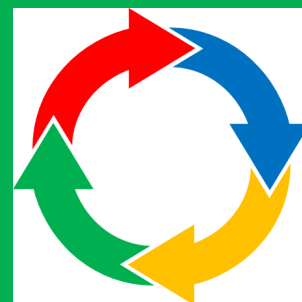


Getting started with solidarity-driven codesign: From "do we do this?" to "how can we do this?"



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"Instead of approaching people and communities with solutions thought of in their absence, we should be in conversation with people and communities to co-construct and implement solutions based on local knowledges and realities" (San Pedro & Kinloch, 2017).

A different approach to family engagement

Many schools and districts across the country have established racial equity as a goal. In the family engagement space, some leaders are moving beyond traditional models of family engagement, such as back to school nights, conferences, and parent-teacher association meetings, that often seek to change parents to accommodate the school's white, middle-class norms. Even the "best practices" of family engagement such as focus groups and listening sessions can inadvertently perpetuate the status quo if families and communities are positioned as passive stakeholders and not active decision-makers (Ishimaru, 2020). As a result, schools miss out on the expertise of families and communities, especially from communities of color. However,

some leaders are working to establish more equitable partnerships between schools and communities that seek to transform systems.

Solidarity-driven codesign is a relational process between families and educators to imagine and design solutions together in ways that acknowledge histories of oppression and seek to transform educational possibilities. This brief introduces common questions and issues in starting solidarity-driven codesign, sharing lessons from two white educators who started codesign in a K-12 school district and in a housing authority. These experiences and common pitfalls can support other leaders, families, and communities as they take up codesign in their contexts.

Overview of codesign

Codesign is an iterative process in which diverse stakeholders come together to collectively imagine and design solutions to challenges they face. This process is about working and designing *with* families, students, and communities who are most impacted by injustices, not designing *for* these communities. Codesign is a type of participatory design research (PDR) rooted in design-based research, Indigenous, and decolonizing methodologies. These theories, frameworks, and methodologies strive for transformative social change (Bang and Vossoughi, 2016).

Codesign recognizes that those most impacted by policies have unique perspectives and knowledge about how to address inequities (Ishimaru and Lott, 2015). Therefore, in codesign efforts, formal leaders such as

teachers, principals, and policymakers do not simply gather input from the community. Instead, codesign works to interrupt the status quo and redefines leaders to include students, parents, and the broader community in addition to formal school and district leaders. Diverse stakeholders come together to build relationships, identify problems, and collaboratively iterate on solutions to these challenges. While school change efforts often focus solely on outcomes, solidarity-driven codesign shifts the priority to building relational trust among participants. Codesign recognizes that we have to attend to the process as well as the outcomes. This approach has the potential to foster solidarities across differences through naming and deconstructing power dynamics (Ishimaru, 2020).

Codesign is made up of cycles in which people:



Common misconceptions about solidarity-driven codesign

Codesign is sometimes misunderstood or interpreted as an “all or nothing” approach. Below are common questions, misconceptions, and clarifications about what codesign really means.

Does codesign mean that you change everything about an organization?

Codesign doesn't mean changing everything all at once everywhere. Codesign is about transforming relationships, but the actual outcome or product can vary in size and scope. It can be best to start small!

Does codesign mean you have to engage with all families at a school or in an organization?

Codesign doesn't require that you engage with all families in a certain context. Start with the families most impacted by the policies or program

you're discussing or those who are not engaged in conventional engagement avenues in your school and/or district, especially Black, Indigenous, Latinx, Asian, and Pacific Islander families who experience poverty, speak languages other than English, or have disabilities. The number of people is not what's most important; rather, it's the depth of relationships and sustained collaborative work that matter.

Does codesign mean you spend all your time on relationship building?

Some leaders believe that we either have to focus exclusively on relationship building or solely on the outcomes. Codesign pushes us to prioritize both the process and the product. The nature of collective action varies by the context and group, but codesign resists a false “either/or” choice, embracing instead a “both/and” focus on relationships in the process of making change.

“Solidarity-driven codesign opens possibilities for tapping nondominant expertise and building collective capacity in the journey toward educational justice among families, schools, and communities” (Ishimaru, 2020).

Where do we begin?

WHO should we codesign with?

Codesign must include community members directly impacted by policies and practices in schools, especially community members of color. As Congresswoman Ayanna Presley says “the people closest to the pain should be the closest to the power, driving and informing the policymaking.” Youth, educators, families, and community members can all be active decision makers and participants in codesign efforts.

WHAT should we codesign?

While codesign is mostly about transforming relationships and ways of being, it does involve a product or outcome. The “what” of codesign is sometimes too broad or too narrow, which can lead to challenges. For example, if codesign is presented without any boundaries, it may be difficult for participants to come up with solutions that can be implemented and participants may feel like they need to change everything about their school or organization. Likewise, if the “what” of codesign is too small or if the focus is the implementation of a pre-set program, it could feel insignificant or reinforce dominant dynamics in which families are expected to assimilate to the norms of the school. It is often best to start relatively small and build stamina for a broader codesign project in the future. Ultimately, the decision about what to focus on for the codesign should come from each team and the issues that youth and families of color view as most pressing should be prioritized.

What CONDITIONS are conducive for codesign?

Codesign processes can take time, and if there is an immediate, inflexible deadline, this may constrain the creativity of the process. In addition, there should be sufficient autonomy of the codesign team to make decisions or changes that come about from the codesign. Codesign teams also benefit from having practice holding explicit discussions about race, class, language, culture, power, and justice.

Emerging patterns of starting codesign

In my review of two contexts in which codesign was recently started, these patterns came up repeatedly. They provide a helpful insight into some of the common challenges of starting codesign and how those might be addressed.

1) There are many reasons why educators say that their organization, school, or district is not ready for codesign.

What this sounds like: “It’s a good idea in theory, but we don’t have the capacity or time for this right now.” “We have too many deadlines” “Can we do this during a pandemic?”

How this might be addressed: We encourage teams to shift from “do we do this?” to “how can we do this?” Instead of “we can’t start codesign during a pandemic”, ask “how can we start codesign in our current context of a pandemic?”. As one leader shared, “I don’t think we ever have time to not do codesign. We should always be including families and communities in our decision making processes...and then what the codesign looks like is shaped by factors like how much time we have”. Time or capacity can influence the scope of the codesign, but this shouldn’t be a reason why we aren’t doing it.

What this sounds like: “We need to collect more data” or “We need to do a listening session so we understand what families need and want.”

How this might be addressed: Start with what data has already been collected. Also, listening and collecting data are a part of the first phase of codesign, so this can be an entrée to codesign, recognizing that other data will be collected through the process.

What this sounds like: “We have to first establish trust with the community before starting codesign.”

How this might be addressed: Codesign as a process is meant to build trust among participants. Instead of waiting for trust to be established, leaders facilitated their teams in approaching codesign through the lens of “how can this process build trust?”.

2) Normative power dynamics still show up.

What this sounds like: While a codesign group may include team members from various backgrounds (formal leaders, parents, community members, both white and individuals of color), simply bringing people together is not enough to interrupt asymmetrical power dynamics. Formal leaders often unintentionally dominate these conversations, drive the agenda, and do not take up the ideas put forth by nondominant participants.

How this might be addressed: Ask participants to show up as their full

selves (beyond our titles) and be mindful of power dynamics. Who is taking up space in the codesign meetings? Whose voices are we listening to? When nondominant folks share an idea, is it taken up by the group? Codesign groups can review transcripts of meetings and ask participants to reflect on these dynamics throughout the codesign process.

What this sounds like: As leaders take up codesign, many try to diffuse their positional power by primarily listening in codesign meetings. However, it is important to avoid passivity. For white leaders in particular, there is a fine line between decentering whiteness and disengaging.

How this might be addressed: Instead of defaulting to a “listening only” stance, white leaders should actively engage by naming their positionality, monitoring how much space they take up, asking questions, inviting others to join in, and engaging in critical self-reflection. Also, instead of making assumptions about the needs of others, white leaders should ask team members directly about what they need and desire from the process. This is especially important for cis-gender, heterosexual, white male leaders and others with positional power. These leaders are presumed to have the authority, expertise, power, and solutions. In order to disrupt the status quo, they need to be mindful of power dynamics and work to center youth and families of color.

3) “Vamos por el pastelito, no con una migaja”.

What this sounds like: When asked to imagine solutions, sometimes parents, especially parents who have been marginalized by conventional methods of family engagement, may put back on the table what they think they can ask for or what the system has conditioned them to think they need. Families may suggest an idea that attempts to assimilate parents to the school’s norms (i.e. a parent suggests they be trained in how to support their children with homework). As one leader describes it, “vamos por el pastelito, no con una migaja” or “asking for crumbs, not the whole cake”.

How this might be addressed: Leaders can then ask, “if we do x, does that solve y?” Families and community members often quickly recognize that these “crumbs” will not solve structural inequities. Leaders can also explicitly name this dynamic and move to a social dreaming space by asking questions like, “what do you want for your grandchildren?” and “what’s a starting point that might get us there?”. Activities that foster collective imagining can help to mitigate this.

“What do you want for
your grandchildren?”
“What’s a starting point
that might get us there?”

From “do we do this” to “how can we do this”

While many educators agree with the general ideas of codesign, leaders sometimes get stuck in the early stages. Colleagues may question, “is this the right time?” or suggest, “I like the idea in theory, but it’s not practical.” When leaders can shift the conversation from “do we do this” to “how can we do this”, possibilities emerge. As more educators take up codesign, we hope that sharing their lessons learned can support others who want to undertake codesign as a method of transforming relationships between schools and communities. Furthermore, solidarity-driven codesign must be understood by those taking it up as intentionally disruptive to business-as-usual and conventional, check-box approaches to family engagement. In contrast, codesign processes in education aim to foster racial justice and community well-being.

Additional Resources

More details on codesign can be found in this brief from FLDC: [Transforming the Field of Family Engagement: Co-Designing Research, Practices, and Measures for Educational Justice and Community Wellbeing](#).

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